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THE VATICAN COUNCIL

THIRD SESSION

By

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There are two other leaflets in this series on the Second Vatican Council, both written by Dr. Frederick C. Grant, one of the official Anglican Delegate-Observers. *The Vatican Council* (.05 per copy) and *The Vatican Council: First Session* (.05 per copy).

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The main work of the Third Session has been the consolidation of the ideas and discussions of the first two. The outline of the whole Council can now be clearly seen, and its ultimate shape fairly accurately predicted. There seems every prospect that it will have lived up to its general expectations and fulfilled the hopes which Pope John entertained for it. All this should be made a matter of considerable thanksgiving to God both inside and outside the Roman Church.

Having said this much, we must immediately be careful to define fairly precisely what we mean in this instance by progress and achievement, by expectations and fulfillment. And for this purpose we need to look back to the beginning of it all. The Council was called in 1959 for the purposes of "bringing-up-to-date" the general life of the Church in pastoral methods, liturgy, doctrinal statements, for the consideration of the Church's reactions to the problems of the modern world and for the general consideration of the problems of broken Christian unity.

From the first moments the prophets of gloom took over. They said that reform was neither necessary nor possible. Though Pope John and a few Frenchmen were keen on these things, the general run of Roman Catholics were not, and that even if they did manage to pass a few mild measures of reform, the Curia (the administrative departments of the Vatican) would soon see to it that they became dead letters. When the bishops met the picture for the moment seemed very different. We had the impression that the bishops by a large majority were bent on reform and meant to carry it through. So the first session saw some explosive moments. The texts which had been prepared by the "old guard" in the Vatican were soundly rejected, and reform was cried out for not only from France but from some surprising quarters in all parts of the world. But at the end of the first session Pope John died, and the prophets of gloom said at once that a new Pope would be elected who would put an end to progress. They proved to be mistaken again, and Pope Paul VI took on where Pope John left off.

The second session on the whole followed the course of the first. Texts which merely repeated the schoolbooks were sent back for revision. The new Pope meanwhile had helped the evolution of the Council by three significant actions. First in his speech at the opening of the second session he had made an admission that the Roman Church was itself guilty of some of the estrangements of the past, and suggested that the business of patching up Christian unity should start with such mutual

recognition. He had also modified or added to the structure of many of the Council Commissions in order to give greater scope to the reforming ambitions of the majority of the bishops. And he had given notice that he intended to carry out a reform of the central government of the Church, involving the Curia.

All this gave great promise for the third session, in the fall of 1964. This session has consisted mainly, as was stated above, in the consideration of and voting upon the texts which have been revised as a result of the first two sessions. And here again the prophets of gloom have been proved wrong, in so far as they said that the conservative theologians of the Curia would eventually water-down, explain away or even totally destroy the reforming zeal of the bishops in the first session. Here it should be stated that these 'prophets' were found not only in cynical sources within the Roman Church itself, but perhaps even more in the comment of the world-wide press.

The net achievements of the third session have been three major documents, discussed, voted upon by huge majorities, and officially promulgated by the Pope, so that they have passed into the definitive teaching of the Roman Church. They are the dogmatic constitution *on the Church* and the decrees *on Ecumenism* and *on the Oriental (Roman Catholic) Churches.* The two first decrees will undoubtedly stand as the principal work of the whole Council, and should be received with universal thanksgiving.

The traditional dogmas concerning the Papacy have not been diminished, but they are set in a new and more biblical context in this document. Seen in conjunction with the Schema on the Pastoral Function of Bishops, the papal office is given a more democratic setting and the result is that the whole problem can now be discussed on intelligible grounds. It has been said in various Protestant reports that the central obstacles still remain and that virtually the Vatican Council has achieved little. But it would be less than fair not to remember that most other confessions have inherited doctrinal statements which are now found embarrassing and the work of revision remains untouched.

One other welcome feature of the Decree on the Church concerns the Blessed Virgin Mary. Here again there has been no retraction of existing dogmas, but a halt has been called to further Mariological excesses and a real attempt has been made to tie up the attitude of the Church to her with biblical references. She is described as having only a "subordinate role" in the work of salvation. The title of *mediatrix* is used, but with it goes the explanation that every priest is also a mediator of grace as he administers the sacraments; and in the same way a lay person as he forgives his neighbour or performs a work of mercy. This type of explanation is a help in showing that an effort has truly been made to curb Mariological devotion (which is so dear to many Roman Catholics) and provides a starting

point for more rational and less offensive discussion. The puzzling utterance of the Pope at the closing of the Council when he bestowed on Mary the title of "Mother of the Church" can be seen as a consolation prize for those who were disturbed by the earlier limitation on the development of Marian piety.

The Decree *on Ecumenism* has been much amended in detail, and although its ecclesiology still does not satisfy non-Roman Catholics, it represents a great step forward. The Orthodox, for instance, are recognized as possessing full "Church status" and the Anglican Church is described as having a special place to play in the future of ecumenism. All Christians are, by baptism, full members of the Church in some sense and as a consequence talks in the future will be held "within the Church." To local, national or regional conferences of bishops is left the decision on the practical outcome of this decree, with possibilities of common devotion, discussion and corporate works of mercy. This is all very promising.

The Decree *on the Oriental Churches* (i.e. the Eastern Churches in communion with Rome) received criticism from many sources. It did not do justice to the Orthodox and was too much concerned with the subject of converts. It was said that the central authority in Rome which dealt with these Churches should be composed largely of orientals and therefore more representative and not so Latin in content and consequently juristic in outlook.

Among these spokesmen who wanted a "new deal" was Maximos IV, Melchite Patriarch of Antioch, a giant of the Council, who asked for greater freedom for the ancient catholic office of Patriarch; and at the same time came a request for the suppression of the anomalous "Latin" Patriarchate of Jerusalem. So much for the three promulgated Decrees.

During this third session discussions have also taken place on the following Schemas or "Sets of Propositions":

1. On the *Apostolate of the Laity*. Here, as in most other discussions, came the usual struggle of minds between the "new thought" of the liberal bishops and the old conservatism of those who were happy to leave things as they are. Archbishop d'Souza of Bhopal, India, said "When we realize that we must treat laymen as adults, it is amazing to read in the text that 'nothing is to be done without the bishop.' This phrase could open the door to untold abuses and repression of initiative. The People of God is not a totalitarian state where everything is run from the top. We must show that we are genuinely ready to declericalize our outlook and treat the laity as brothers. The hierarchy should not take upon themselves the laity's responsibilities, but should leave them to do those things which they can do better. For example, why should representatives of the Church at international organizations always be priests? Laymen could be used in many offices in the Curia. They could also be employed in the diplomatic service of the Holy See and could even be appointed Nuncios in some cases."

As Bishop Leven of San Antonio, Texas said: "This is most important for areas where the laity are educated and are ready to give their time and effort to the cause of the Church. Little will be gained if a bishop consults only a few people, especially if these few are only his doctor and his housekeeper. It is desirable that every diocese should have a kind of diocesan senate." It was during this debate that a layman and President of the World Movement of Christian Workers, Mr. Patrick Keegan from Ireland, was invited to speak to the Council. He showed in his person the desire of forward-looking Roman Catholics to take their place in this Apostolate. This Schema is now under revision.

2. The debate *on the Priesthood* was a desultory one in the extreme and the Schema was rejected and ordered to be re-written.

3. Everyone had been waiting for the Schema *on the Church in the Modern World* with its themes on the Church in relation to modern culture, to poverty and hunger, to atheism and to marriage and population problems. The wide range of these discussions is not capable of analysis here, so much was attempted, and so much expected. But the usual trend revealed itself, progressive against conservative. The Council was reminded of the Church's long resistance to contemporary knowledge (i.e. Galileo and so on) and suggested that care should be taken lest she should be allied with a particular culture and be embedded in it. The whole of the 19th century had been spent in denying the "enlightenment"; and now in the present century had

come the day of reckoning. The facts concerning Fr. Teilhard de Chardin and the existence of the Index in its present form were grounds for misgiving. The state of illiteracy in Latin America (of formidable proportions) was said to be of the Church's making to some extent.

During that part of the debate which concerned population control Archbishop Heenan of Westminster attacked the "Periti" or specialist theologians and gained the disapproval of the Council. The Pope had stated that he would regard as his own prerogative the wording of the text regarding birth control, but it became obvious during the progress of the debate that something more pastoral and positive was required to replace the prohibitions which have so far characterized the Roman Catholic position on this question.

The section on world peace followed the pattern which would be expected of any Christian assembly, totally condemning war as a means of arbitration, yet being unable to agree on total unilateral disarmament as the duty of a Christian country. Declarations against world poverty and hunger were made in strong terms; and at a dramatic moment the Pope offered his tiara for sale, the proceeds to be given to the poor. This Schema was also withdrawn for revision and to be re-written in the light of the views of the Council Fathers.

Finally at the end of the Session, a number of minor Schemas were rushed through:

4. *On Missions.* A more representative international control of missions was pleaded for, and for the Church in new areas to be liber-

ated from bondage to European forms of culture.

5. *On Religious* (i.e., monks, nuns and "lay institutes"). This debate revealed that Religious in the Roman Catholic Church numbered 2,000,000. A strong appeal for the devotion and habits of life of Religious to be brought up-to-date came forward here, and a request for diversity of spirituality, as regards contemplative and active orders.

6. *On Seminaries.* Here the issue resolved itself mainly round the question whether the education of seminarists should continue to be exclusively and universally based on formation in Thomistic philosophy, or whether new forms of thought and the insights produced by modern knowledge were to be allowed to have their place in the curricula.

7. *On Christian Education.* Some pleaded here the right of the parent to be allowed to have his child educated in a school of his own choice, and according to his conscience. What was not touched upon was whether the corresponding right was also to be allowed to the State to protect the child from indoctrination in excess.

8. Almost at the last moment came the Schema on the *Sacrament of Matrimony.* This was a long-awaited debate especially as it concerned the thorny matter of mixed marriages. Some improvements were shown in the text, as compared with the situation as it now exists. For example, it is suggested that the ex-communication following the case of mixed marriage contracted outside the Roman Catholic Church shall be dispensed with, as should

be the extraction of a promise from the non-Roman party, and allowing the Roman party to promise "as far as possible" to educate the children as Catholics.

9. The Declaration *on the Jews "and other non-Christians."* After numberless changes the declaration on the Jews (exonerating them from the guilt of our Lord's death) has ended up here, and not where it did not belong and never should have been, as an appendix to *de Ecumenismo*. The declaration is seen as a general statement on church policy, with a few theological undertones. The progress of this document is in itself an interesting study in what has really been happening deep down in the Council. For one thing (the most important of all to us) is the disassociation of it from Ecumenism, lest its position there should have suggested that Roman ecumenism thought of all beings outside the "one true church" as being in the same relation to it—Christian and non-Christian—so that it didn't really make much difference to Rome whether you were an Orthodox or an atheist: an inch was as good as a mile. The fact is that there were those (and some in very high places) whose thinking was of this kind: it is all the more important to know that that narrow attitude has been officially disowned in a conciliar document.

During the interval between the second and third sessions there was a certain amount of revision of the text which aroused the suspicions of the cynics, quite unnecessarily. Having previously stated that the Jews were

in no way culpable of our Lord's death, the sponsors of the document were asked to make room for the sheer fact that it was Jews who cried "Crucify him," though that does not, of course, inculpate any but those actually present on that occasion. When it became clear that the document was bound to cause misunderstandings, and perhaps even reprisals, in the Middle East among the very nationalistic Arab countries, the Council went courageously ahead with what was a pastoral document with no contemporary political overtones.

During the last two days of the third Session came considerable drama. The declaration on Religious Liberty, so long awaited, but delayed, modified and blocked by the conservative members of the Curia, finally made its appearance as a printed text in final form on the Tuesday of the last week, in the hope that a vote might be taken before the ending of the Session. The council of Presidents decided that the Bishops had not had enough time to see the text in its revised form. An uproar of large proportions followed this statement; and it became clear that the overwhelming majority of the Council Fathers were not behind this verdict. The Pope, feeling unable to overrule the Presidents, promised that this declaration should have first place on the agenda of the next Session. It must be borne in mind that it was Pope John's ten presidents and not Pope Paul's four moderators who were responsible for this overruling. It seems that it will be the American

bishops particularly who will find it difficult to go back to their own people after this set-back; they appeared to be most shocked by the whole matter. My own reaction was not so sharp. It does not seem to be of shattering importance if, after four centuries of error in this question, the declaration of the official conversion of the Roman Church becomes delayed by a few months.

Many bishops left Rome in bad humour after what was regarded as a shabby episode, but what can best be learned from it is that the liberals are bound to be the final victors, and what is needed in the Roman Church above all else is a new group of officials in high places, who will help rather than hinder the Pope as he proceeds with his intentions to renew the Church. This might well be the subject of our intercessions when we pray, as we should constantly do, for our brethren who are under obedience to the See of Rome.

The balance of the Council at the end of the third session can thus be seen, from our point of view, to be very favourable. The constitution of the Church, by stating the principle of the "collegiality" of the bishops has opened up a whole new field of discussion on the problems surrounding the Papacy; and it has clipped the wings of those who would exaggerate Marian piety. The decree on Ecumenism has at last made possible every kind of discussion of the matters outstanding between us. Moreover it inaugurates a new era of different relationships both ecclesiastically and psychologically. These new facts of our

time should be accepted thankfully, and in faith for the future. What has been controversy can become dialogue. The mutual facing of the problems which all Christians meet in the world should liberate new energies and encourage common attempts at reform.*

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* A fuller treatment of the question of relationships after the Council can be found in the author's booklet *Anglican-Roman Relations,* published by Morehouse-Barlow Co., New York, 75 cents per copy.

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